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14 Years in Cuban Jails

American Endured Psychological Torture

By Art Harris
Washington Post Staff Writer

His 14 years in Cuban jails began in solitary confinement with a steady diet of cornmush and maggots. He slept on a wooden bunk with no mattress and relieved himself through a hole in the floor. There were frequent interrogations beneath bright lights where guards fired rapid questions at him in Spanish he could not understand and asked him, among other things, "What do you want to say to us before we shoot you?"

"I was never afraid of that," said steel-nerved Lawrence K. Lunt, one of four Americans freed Monday after spending more than a decade imprisoned in Cuba on political and espionage charges. Nor did he blink, he said, when Cuban guards suggested that his Belgian wife, Beatrice, "was going crazy" raising their three sons alone.

"I knew it was nonsense," Lunt told reporters yesterday. "I knew she was leading as normal a life as she could."

These lies by guards were all part of the "psychological torture" Castro used in an attempt to break the Americans, said Lunt, who was never physically tortured. Transferred from jail to jail, he smuggled in magazines to keep abreast of life on the outside and banded together with other prisoners in educational seminars, those with more learning teaching those with less.

His faith in God, the works of Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the camaraderie of other political prisoners, twice yearly visits from his wife, and letters from friends helped him survive the years spent waiting and working in rock quarries.

Monthly packages of chocolates, guava paste and writing materials delivered by the Belgian ambassador also buoyed his spirits, he said.

He even feigned interest in the propaganda lectures Castro used to try to rehabilitate the prisoners.

Lunt acknowledged that he had worked for the CIA, but said he was never paid. He declined to discuss details of the relationship.

He was 42 when arrested, a gringo rancher with 5,000 acres on the island, three young sons and a new wife. Leaving Havana to attend his parents' 50th wedding anniversary, Lunt was stopped at the airport and later jailed for spying. It was 1965.

In the early years, the State Department shrugged him off as a CIA matter, while the CIA denied that he was any of their business. All the while, of course, Lunt, a tired pawn in the chess game of international diplomacy, languished in Cuban jails.

He is 55 now, and many things have come to pass—Vietnam, men on the moon, women's liberation to name a few—but he says he is not bitter for the 14 years "taken away by the Communists." He regrets only "the exaggerated length of time lost with my wife and sons, missing their maturation."

"I have no regrets for what I did," said the former CIA contract employe. "I'm not bitter....My love of my country and all it stands for has been a sustaining factor in keeping the bitterness out of my heart, the feeling of being an American and all it entails."

Birds chirped merrily and sunlight streamed through the trees yesterday as the voice, a flat monotone that crowded out any hint of sentiment, trailed off and the mind sometimes wandered. Clad in the prison-issue wool pants he was given in Cuba (he said he hadn't had time to shop), Lunt sat on the Georgetown patio of his sister, Faith Titus, sipped from a glass of chocolate milk and piled on first a sweater, then a wool blazer because he had not yet adjusted to the northerly weather. When a police siren screeched through the stillness Lunt visibly winced.

"I hate that siren," said Lunt. "Everytime we were taken somewhere, we had an escort" with a siren.

In declining to discuss his relationship with the CIA, Lunt did say that he had been recruited by the agency during a trip to the United States, though "I never received any money" from them.

The son of a prominent New England psychatrist who moved to Wyoming to ranch, Lunt briefly attended Harvard, and served as an Air Corps navigator in World War II and in the Air Force during the Korean War, he joined his father as a ranching partner for a time, then sold a small Rhode Island farm he owned in 1956 and set out with the grubstake, his wife and children to Cuba.

Why Cuba? "I wanted to find an undeveloped area where I could develop my own way; I was looking for a challenge and found it in a rundown ranch," he said of his former spread on the northern coast.

He began raising 350 head of cattle, experimenting with new breeding and farming techniques and paid five guajiros and their families "slightly more" than the going wages. In the final days of dictator Fulgencio Batista, whose oppressive policies offended him, he said he even aided Castro guerrillas.

When Castro later ordered hundreds of executions in 1960, Lunt suspected he had bet on the wrong horse. Nonetheless, as a large landowner in the early days of Castro's rise to power, he says he was tolerated because his ranching and farming activities were in keeping with the goals of the revolution.

None of that mattered, of course, when the Cubans arrested him for spying on May 26, 1965, and sentenced him to 30 years in prison. They had found anti-Castro Cubans hiding on his land, along with communication gear, sources say, and Lunt was reportedly keeping an eye on Soviet missiles he'd spotted in caves near the ranch.

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He spent the first few months in an interrogation cell in Havana, eating bread and milk for breakfast "well-cooked" maggots in the cornmeal mush for lunch, with soup and the same for dinner. It was the same fare behind bars at La Cabana, an old prison where the men slept stacked up on four-layer bunks. Sometimes they were fed a small fish, "mostly bones," recalled Lunt. Nowadays, he said, the fish is "used for fertilizer" and is "barely fit for human consumption."

"You get used to it," said Lunt, the scion of a wealthy family. "The way we are brought up eating different menus, I never thought I'd be able to adjust. But man's ability to adapt is incredible."

Cuban intellectuals and others political prisoners—that included three other Americans, all of whom were released Monday with Lunt—lived side by side with cockroaches, rats and bedbugs in "atrocious" conditions that hadn't improved in the 200 years since La Cabana had been built, he said.

Every morning, guards came for the prisoners who were to be shot, and at 9 p.m. almost every night, Lunt heard the rifles crack There were 15 to 20 executions each month in late 1965, he said. "We couldn't see them (shot), but we could hear the coup de grace."

In the first few years, he was allowed only Spanish books and magazines, but the prisoners soon discovered that by taping magazines and books to their bodies—along with tobacco leaves—they could fool hte guards and keep up with the outside world. Families smuggled tape in with food bundles. When guards instituted naked body searches, prisoners outwitted them by sending the same naked prisoner in twice.

Lunt saw senseless brutality, too. Once, at a rock quarry on the Isle of Pines, a guard knocked him to the ground with the blade of his bayonet for no reason, Lunt said. When a fellow prisoner rushed to his aid, the guard shot him. The prisoner survived, Lunt said.

Nonetheless, the worse the conditions, the better the morale, he said.

But the physical conditions weren't nearly as difficult to cope with as the psychological techniques. Lunt described as "more exquisite torture . . . the Cubans have learned from the Russians."

They promised him that, "with a little cooperation, we can help you get out of prison. Tell us about your Russian affiliations," an affiliation which he said he never had. "They offered a sweet and gave you a sour," he said. He hung tough and made it for 14 years by "practicing self-control," getting regular exercise, studying and teaching other prisoners English and geography, and by praying.

"I've always had a great faith in God," he said. "What (also) keeps you going is the morale of fellow prisoners, loyalty of family and friends, and maintaining one's mental and physical health."

He called prison "a tremendous post-graduate course for me." Lunt said he read "everything from Shakespeare to the old philosophers of Europe." Illiterate prisoners, he said, not only learned basic grammar, but went on to speak French, German and Italian.

"Anyone who spends more than 10 years in prison," he said, "should find it an excellent chance for self-improvement."

In the early years, he was discouraged to meet other American prisoners who had heard little of him and the conditions, but he said his spirits never hit rock bottom. "I was born an optimist," he said. "I supposed I would be a long time in prison, but never as long as 14 years."

Gradually, over the years, while his wife raised their children in Brussels, prison conditions improved.

In the modern Combinado del Este prison he was watching television the day after President Carter pardoned four Puerto Rican nationalists, whose release Castro had set years ago as the price for the Americans' freedom. "We were all hoping Castro would keep his promise," said Lunt.

The next morning, the American prisoners were awakened at 3:30 a.m., ordered to pack in five minutes, and, 12 hours later, loaded into a Black Maria. They were taken to a comfortable holding cell where they were fattened up for eight days before being transfered to VIP quarters and "given the red capret treatment—Russian pickles, ham, rum." Then they were put on a plane to the States.

He was not only shocked at bra-less women in T-shirts at the Miami airport, but was "appalled" by the varieties of food to choose from in supermarkets and the general "opulence of American life" after the austerity of Cuba.

The last few days of adjusting have been a "truly Rip Van Winkle experiment," he said.

His plans are now to be with family, perhaps to ranch in Wyoming.

Lunt was asked why he went back to Cuba after CIA officials warned him not to return during a visit to the United States in 1964. He went back, he said, "because I didn't want to leave those five men and their families who I knew were implicated with me."

Three of the five cowboys who worked his ranch spent from one to five years in jail, he said. The other two spent 10 to 12 years behind bars. Lunt and his ranch hands spent the first few years together before being split up.

The Cubans "felt I was a bad influence on them," he said, cracking a smile.

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